2 Event risk management and online events practices: An example of a student-organised event amid the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

With the restrictions on traveling and gathering which have been employed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, event planning and execution face all kinds of uncertainties, and contingency plans are an indispensable part in the planning process. While some events have been forced to postpone or cancel, a number of organisers have moved the events online or partly online. This case study uses a student-organised real event as an example to illustrate both the importance of risk management to success in event planning and execution under pandemic situations and how the risks have been identified and managed. The case also shares the practices for holding a dual-mode hybrid event.

Subjects: Event design; risk management; online events; hybrid event

Introduction

The context of the case is a real-world event organised by a group of students to fulfil the requirements of a course named 'Event management: Hosting an event' offered by the Macau Institute for Tourism Studies (IFTM).

The course is for junior students from an event management programme. After two years of theory-based learning of event planning and event management, the IFTM event students are required to plan and host a themed event within one academic semester of their third academic year, starting from the generation of event ideas to the actual execution of the plan, and finally to the evaluation of the event project. A whole class of around 20–30 students works as the organisation committee and is responsible for all the functions of an event, including planning, market-

ing, sponsorship, financing and budgeting, logistics, and risk management, under the supervision of a faculty member. The event should be self-sufficient financially, and the class members must make sure they at least break even at the end. The class receives the seed money of 5000 Macao Pacatas (approximately USD625) from the school to start up but needs to return the money after the event. As a rule, any profit from the event will not be kept by students and should instead be donated. So, students also need to select a charity organisation to be their beneficiary; the charity will receive the profit and work as a partner in the event.

In the fall semester of 2021, starting in late August, the class with 20 students proposed a tourism theme and named their event 'Boxcation', borrowing the idea of 'Staycation'. The goal of the event was to provide fun experiences to the local Macao residents, who had been constrained in the city by the Covid-19 pandemic for 2 years. The event was held in a box-like venue where people could enjoy different cultures of different destinations, including cuisines, games and costumes, just as they usually would have experienced in travelling. The format was originally designed as a fair, like a free market, providing food stalls, game booths, costume try-outs for photos, stage performances, etc. on a set date of November 13, 2021. Meanwhile, a side-event of a children's drawing competition, of which the tourism-related drawing theme was named 'My Dream Trip', was also organised to add attractiveness to the major event. The students selected the Macao Special Olympics as the beneficiary of the event, as the Winter Olympics would be hosted in Beijing in early 2022.

At the time of the students' event, the Covid-19 pandemic was still affecting people's lives around the world. China implemented a more rigid policy to rein in the pandemic by vaccination, strict quarantine, and extensive testing. Occasional lockdowns of parts or all of a city were also part of the pandemic norm in Chinese cities, including Macao, during which all schools were closed and only online classes were allowed.

Staging the Boxcation event

The situation: Issues faced by the organisation committee

A: Uncertainties caused by the pandemic call for effective risk management

For any event, risk management is a vital and indispensable component of the organisation and management. With the Covid-19 pandemic still going on and the prevention measures taken by the Macao government affecting people's daily life at the time of the 'Boxcation' event, risk management was even more prominent than would usually be the case. The event was faced with various uncertainties. First, to achieve the event goal, the class preferred to host a face-to-face event, but whenever new positive cases of Covid-19 emerged, physical school activities would be limited or even cancelled. Second, the prolonged pandemic had significantly affected the local economy, and both companies (potential sponsors) and residents were very cautious on spending. The Macao residents were also concerned about their health and safety while attending any events with crowds of people.

The students had been lectured on the principles of generic event risk management before their real event. But for this specific type of event on their hands, they needed a more detailed risk management plan to address all particular potential problems. Rounds of discussions and analysis had been done. The students identified a few outstanding risks, among many others, which could have devastating effects on the success of the event, and with which they would have to cope:

1   There would be a local breakout of Covid-19, and so no gatherings of people would be allowed by the government.

2   There would not be enough financial resources to support the event.

3   Guests would not be interested in the event and/or there would not be enough attendees on the event date.

B: Issues related to an online event or hybrid event

Because China adopted a zero-case Covid-19 prevention policy, Macao followed the comparatively rigid prevention measures, including social distancing, mask wearing, and limiting indoor gatherings. Educational teaching and learning had been switching between online and face-to-face modes, depending on the incidence of positive Covid-19 cases in the society. Under this circumstance, an online event seemed more appropriate. However, from the past lessons, students had quite unsatisfactory learning experiences in hosting pure online events. Many event activities were hard to deliver via the virtual platform, and the students were reluctant to sacrifice their event ideas. For Boxcation, most activities were experiential in essence, and online delivery would not achieve the same effects. On the other hand, due to the nature of the student event, meaning that the event was part of their curriculum and the whole class had to follow the school's academic calendar, the students could not afford to postpone or cancel the event.

Furthermore, if the event had to take place online, the students faced other questions: Should they produce the event purely online? Or should they host a face-to-face event and at the same time live-stream broadcast the event online, for a better effect? The hybrid mode of event execution would definitely require additional effort and expertise. Although the students might have experience joining virtual seminars and online classes, most of them had limited knowledge of hosting a real online event. How to deliver a high-quality online event became a big challenge.

The process: Coping with the identified risks

Covid-related restrictions

The situational analysis revealed that the chance to have a pure physical event was quite small, and adding the virtual element to the event seemed inevitable. To manage the first major risk identified, the class decided to plan for both a physical mode and an online mode. There were then three scenarios. First, if they were lucky enough, they could have a free face-to-face event. Second, if school activities were still allowed and students could work physically as a team in the event venue, but attendance of guests had to be controlled, the students could deliver a live-stream event, with or without on-site guests in the venue depending on the exact real-time Covid-prevention measures. Third, if the situation deteriorated and no gatherings of people were allowed at all, even for teaching and learning